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Ethiopian Psalter: Psalms, Canticles of the Prophets, Song of Songs, and *Waddase Maryam* (Praise of Mary)

In Ge'ez, decorated manuscript on parchment

Ethiopia, c. 1850-1900

118 folios, modern foliation in pencil, complete (collation i² ii-xii¹⁰ xiii⁶), first quire unnumbered, quires ii-xii, numbered 1-11 in Ge'ez, final quire numbered 12 in Ge'ez, ruled in blind (justification 125 x 100 mm.), prickings top, bottom, and outer margins, written in at least two different Raqiq hands in black with the usual rubrics in red (some now faded), designating the opening lines of textual divisions, occasional alternating lines in the beginning of major textual divisions, the name of God, and sometimes other names, Harags (literally, vines) or ornamental headpieces throughout, comprised of latticework or foliate design, in two styles, some carefully executed and colored in red ink, and others that are less accomplished and solely in black, marking the beginning of text divisions, but here some occur between Psalms (e.g. f. 27v), some texts are separated only by a line of red dots, thumbing and occasional stains, last folio stained column b within the text (which remains legible), but overall in very good condition. CONTEMPORARY ETHIOPIAN BINDING of blind-tooled reddish goatskin over wooden boards, doublures of red patterned cloth, broad turn-ins blind-tooled with double and triple fillets, rebacked with original flat spine laid down, top of the spine split horizontally near the top, and partially repaired, brown cloth case. Dimensions 175 x 116 mm.

Ethiopian manuscripts are remarkable products of a living scribal culture that has survived from Antiquity until today. Their bindings often preserve structures similar to early Christian books from the fourth to the seventh centuries. Psalters are an excellent representative of this tradition, since they are one of the commonest of Ethiopian manuscripts, copied in great numbers for private devotion and for liturgical use. This Psalter must have been used to guide the private prayers of two of its owners, both women, who left their names in the volume.

PROVENANCE

1. The manuscript is undated; the principal hand employed here is of a style called Raqiq (literally "slender") that has been in use from the seventeenth century until the present day. However, there are some small paleographic features, such as faint serifs at the top and bottom of vertical strokes, that suggest that the manuscript was written in the second half of the nineteenth century or later. The name of one of the later owners appears in bright blue/purple ink, which suggests that the individual belonged to the late nineteenth or early twentieth century (see below). (We acknowledge the expertise of Professor David Appleyard for the description of this manuscript, substantially repeated here).
2. At the end of Psalm 60 (f. 37v) the name of Walatta Kidan ("daughter of the Covenant") is inserted in the text. Another female owner's name, Walatta Gabre'el ("daughter of Gabriel"), is written throughout the text, seemingly at random: bottom f. 13v, added in blue and then erased above the first line of Psalm 51 (f. 33v); again in the margin at Psalm 71 (f. 44v); and again in purple above the opening Harag of the Canticles of the Prophets (f. 91v).

TEXT

ff. 1v-2v, *Salams* to the Archangel Michael;

ff. 3-91, Psalms (*Mäzmurä Dawit*); numbered up to 146, the last few unnumbered;

The Psalms were probably translated from Greek into Ge'ez in the late fifth century, the earliest evidence for which are quotations in inscriptions dating to the first half of the sixth century (Knibb, 1999, pp. 46-52). The oldest surviving manuscripts of the Psalms date, however, from the fourteenth century. The Ethiopic Psalms follow the numbering of the Greek Septuagint, with differences from the Hebrew and Western Bibles arising from variations in division. For instance, in the Hebrew Bible Pss. 9 and 10 correspond to Ps. 9 in the Septuagint, whilst Pss. 114 and 115 in the Hebrew Bible are counted as one Ps. 113, but Ps. 116 is split into two in the Septuagint and Ethiopian recensions as Ps. 114 and 115 (Heldman, 2010). In addition, the Ethiopic Bible contains an additional Psalm, numbered as 151 which is not part of the Western canon.

ff. 91v-100, Canticles of the Prophets (*Mähaläyä Näbiyyat*);

These are a collection of canticles or "songs" drawn from the Old and New Testament: First Song of Moses (Ex 15:1-19), Second Song of Moses (Deut 32:1-21), Third Song of Moses (Deut 32:22-43), Song of Hannah (1 Kgs [1 Sam] 2:1-10), Prayer of Hezekiah (Is 38:10-20), Prayer of Manasseh (apocryphal), Song of Jonah (Jon 2:3-10), First Song of the Three Youths in the Furnace (Dan 3:26-45), Second Song of the Three Youths in the Furnace (Dan 3: 52-56), Third Song of the Three Youths in the Furnace (Dan 3:57-88), Song of Habakkuk (Hab 3:1-19), Song of Isaiah (Is 26:9-20), Song of Our Lady Mary, or the Magnificat (Lk 1:46-55), Song of Zachariah (Lk 1:68-79), Song of Simeon, or the Nunc Dimittis (Lk. 2:29-32).

ff.100-104v, Song of Songs (*Mähaläyä Mähaläy*), known in the Ethiopian tradition as "The Song Songs of Solomon";

ff.104v-116, *Wäddase Maryam* (*Praise of Mary*);

An important Office of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and one of the three Offices for the Virgin Mary. Tradition attributes it to Ephrem the Syrian (d. 373) or to Simeon the Potter, a Syrian poet of the fifth/sixth century. Neither attribution, however, is tenable. More likely is that the Ethiopian text was translated from Christian Arabic in the second half of the fourteenth century, when many such translations were made under the auspices of the Ethiopian metropolitan, Abba Sälama the Translator (Weninger, 2010).

ff.116r-119v *Salams* to the Archangel Michael (in a different hand).

The texts in our manuscript, following the tradition of Ethiopian Psalters, include the Psalms, the Canticles of the Prophets, the Song of Songs, and the *Wäddase Maryam* ("Praise of Mary"). The *Anqäṣä Bərhan* ("Gate of Light"), a second liturgical text devoted to the Virgin Mary, often found in Ethiopian Psalters, was not included in the present manuscript. The text closing

the initial folio contains part of a *Salam* or hymn of salutation to St. Michael (repeated at the end). The flyleaf at the beginning contains pen trials in several somewhat untutored hands.

The Psalter is one of the commonest of Ethiopian manuscripts, being produced in great numbers for private devotion as well as for liturgical use in churches. Copies of the Ethiopian Psalter are to be found in all the major European and American collections. Unusual amongst Ethiopian Christian texts, the Psalms, Canticles, and the Song of Songs are always copied in a single column of lines of unequal length, or stichs. All other texts are written in one, two or occasionally, in larger manuscripts, three justified columns.

Ethiopia is home to a remarkable Christian tradition dating back at least to the fourth century. Until the seventh century Ethiopia maintained close contact with the Coptic Church; after the Islamic conquest of Egypt in the 640s, the Orthodox church of Ethiopia developed largely in isolation. Medievalists and historians of the book are particularly interested in Ethiopian manuscripts, since an active scribal culture was preserved there well into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Psalter described here is written in Ge'ez, a syllabic script traditionally used for Ethiopian liturgical texts, in red and black ink on parchment pages.

Ethiopian manuscripts, even those of a relatively late date such as the present example, are marvelous because their binding structures survive as archetypes of early Christian, specifically Coptic, codices from the fourth to seventh centuries (Szirmai, 1999, pp. 45-50; Boudalis, 2017). The quires are sewn with unsupported link-stitch and then laced into rough-hewn wooden boards. The flat spine in our manuscript was left uncovered, making this an ideal binding for classroom use, since the sewing and quire structure are easily examined.

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